

Leonora Carrington, Mexico, and the Culture of Death

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André Breton's entry on Leonora Carrington in the 1950 edition of his *Anthology of Black Humor* recognizes the surrealist writer and painter for an extremism that resonated with the other literary figures assembled in the volume, such as Sade, Jarry, Nietzsche, Swift, and Kafka. Including her work for the first time in this later edition of the anthology, Breton characteristically singles out Carrington's youth and beauty; yet his preface to her work lingers on the "devastating precision" of her artistic practices, as well as on the intricacy of her written work's recourse to discomfiture and violence. "Curiosity," Breton writes, "here brought to its most ardent point, finds practically no outlet save in the *forbidden*."¹ In celebrating the unsettling reaches of Carrington's nonconformism, Breton seeks less to isolate the political exigency of her work than to formalize the extent to which its transgressive, antisocial charge serves as a medium for the "mysterious exchange of humorous pleasure" Breton ascribes to *l'humour noir*.² In a manner consistent with his literary and philosophical collection of black humorists, Breton situates Carrington within an ethical rather than strictly political genealogy. For Breton, the imaginative recourse to pessimism, negation, and violence serves as both a condition and a medium for communal experience.

Breton's *Anthology* proposes a form of human relation predicated on black humor's negation of self-sufficiency. In doing so, it outlines a surrealist version of broader midcentury notions of negative intersubjectivity that flourished in the wake of Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel's master-slave dialectic, according to which, as Maurice Blanchot later put it, "a being does not want to be recognized, it wants to be contested: in order to exist it goes toward the other, which contests and

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at times negates it ... this way it will perhaps exist, experiencing itself as an always prior exteriority, or as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence.”³ For Blanchot, as for Georges Bataille, Immanuel Levinas, and other midcentury French intellectuals, what achieves the shattering effect predicative of any such relation of prior exteriority—and indeed, what calls being into question most radically—is death, specifically, the death of an other: “my presence for another who absents himself by dying.”⁴ The inaccessibility of death as a subjective experience paradoxically constitutes the absolute event from which all existence proceeds as a recuperation of being from absurdity and nothingness. Breton, for his part, does not share Blanchot’s existentialist, Heideggerian predilection; in the *Anthology of Black Humor* he emphasizes less the radical absence Blanchot ascribes to death than a dialectical return to contemplation he associates with Hegel’s notion of objective humor. Yet Breton no less firmly articulates a mode of relation based on the suspension of a subject’s claim to self-sufficiency.

Breton’s *Anthology* mobilizes Carrington’s work toward an ethical project likewise configured according to a fundamental insufficiency underwritten by contestation and death. The entry on Carrington features her 1939 short story “The Debutante,” in which a hyena conspires to attend a debutante ball in the narrator’s stead by tearing off her maid’s face and impersonating a human. The death of an other denotes here a deliberate act of predatory violence, which becomes, in turn, the ironic vehicle for two forms of social relation: the aristocratic society demarcated by balls and cultivated manners, as well, more subtly, as the perverse friendship through which the hyena stands in as the narrator’s proxy.⁵ Carrington’s “black humor” consists, in other words, of an ironic reduction of death’s radical dissolution to a simple contract, a matter of convenience.

Carrington’s own postwar work in Mexico becomes all the more striking in this context. Without contesting Breton’s neo-Hegelianism, Carrington’s work fundamentally alters the terms of the negative community imagined by midcentury European philosophy. Whereas for Bataille, Blanchot, and their postwar peers the absolute event of another’s death constituted an “impossible” condition for ethical relations, Carrington instead views death itself as impossible, with an irony rendered poignant by her own death in May 2011, at the age of 94. For Carrington, whose writing and painting during the mid-1950s and early 1960s was informed as much by her participation in Mexican avant-garde groups as by her ties to Surrealism, the “prior exteriority” Blanchot identifies as the antisocial condition of existence is no less radically grounded in the experience of death. Yet the experience of death featured in Carrington’s work from this period is no longer the death

envisaged by postwar European philosophers—as limit, as dissolution, as absolute disappearance—but a death recast in terms of a pre-Columbian funerary culture that figures it as a mode of recirculation.

This essay discusses Carrington's continued experiments with black humor—as an ethical as well as aesthetic project—during the period of her close involvement with the Mexican avant-garde. This period began shortly after her arrival in Mexico after World War II, and culminated in her epic mural project for the Museo Nacional de Antropología in 1964.⁶ Beginning in the mid-1950s, as her painting began receiving major public recognition in Mexico, Carrington engaged in literary and artistic collaboration with major intellectuals of the midcentury generation, most notably Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Elena Poniatowska, Salvador Elizondo, Juan Soriano, and Juan García Ponce. She participated in the Poesía en Voz Alta theater group in 1956 and 1957, designing the costumes and set for Paz's sole theatrical work, an adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Rappacini's Daughter*, as well as publishing several plays of her own. She contributed to a number of other experimental groups and journals as well, most notably the short-lived journal *S.NO.B*, which published seven issues in 1962.⁷ This essay focuses on two short texts from this period: a play published in the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* in 1957, entitled “La invención del mole” (The Invention of *Mole*), as well as a short story published in *S.NO.B* in 1962, entitled “De cómo funde un industria o el sarcófago de hule” (How to Start a Pharmaceuticals Business, Or, The Rubber Sarcophagus). Both texts—as is the case with other of Carrington's works from this period—are informed by the midcentury Mexican intelligentsia's interest in ancient Aztec and Mayan cultural practices, revealing the extent to which Carrington's work in Mexico framed its black humor in historically contingent terms.⁸ For Carrington, as for Paz, the Mexican culture of death offered a means for confronting the modern humanistic tendency to suppress death as a “disagreeable fact, contrary to all our concepts and to the very meaning of our lives.”⁹ But it also provided a strategy, I maintain, for interrogating the European philosophical retrieval of death's ontological priority as the mediating interval between being and nothingness. Appealing neither to a radical absence nor to a transcendental power of universal disintegration, Carrington's work instead frames death as a no less “shattering” continuity, regulated according to an economy of reciprocity and return. It is within this formal economy that Carrington grounds her ideas of historical and social propriety, her darkly comic stories and tales elaborating an ethics of both social conduct and historical justice as well. Without reverting to nostalgic humanisms—or, for that matter, to the New Age holism with which her work has at times been associated—Carrington's Mexican writing invokes a cosmological system through

which, as Paz puts it, the cult of life becomes inseparable from the cult of death.¹⁰

Published in the same issue of the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura* as Paz's *La hija de Rappaccini* (Rappaccini's Daughter) in 1957, Carrington's "La invención del mole" stages a mortal confrontation between European and Mexican cults of death, explicitly setting off Catholic and Aztec religions in a Socratic dialogue. Like Paz's theatrical adaptation of Hawthorne's 1844 short story, Carrington's one-act play—which unfolds in a single scene—is likewise an adaptation.¹¹ Yet unlike the other works written and performed for the Poesía en Voz Alta group at this time, Carrington's play does not appropriate European or U.S. literary texts as the basis of its dramatic form. It instead revises two popular myths about the origin of Mexico's national dish, *guajolote en mole poblano*: poached turkey in mole sauce. The great Mexican poet Alfonso Reyes had, in his 1953 *Memorias de cocina y bodega*, recently waxed anew about this "*pièce de résistance* of our cuisine," invoking the common attribution of the dish to a Dominican nun, Sor Andrea de la Asunción, in the convent of Santa Rosa in Puebla.¹² According to one legend, the meal—a transubstantiation of humble ingredients into a noble synthesis—was revealed to Sor Andrea in a stroke of divine inspiration as she struggled to prepare a banquet for the visiting viceroy of Aragon in the late 1680s. A second, more satirical legend ascribes the dish's origin to a monk, Fray Pascual Bailón, who was similarly rushing to prepare a meal for a visiting archbishop; after accidentally ruining the intended meal, the monk prayed for and received divine intervention after angrily emptying the contents of the kitchen into a giant pot. The miraculous result was, in turn, lauded by the visiting archbishop.¹³

In a manner consistent with the midcentury avant-garde's increasingly cosmopolitan reframing of Mexican cultural nationalism, Carrington's theatrical version of the myth inverts the ecclesiastical genesis of this national dish. While still depicting a scene of hospitality, Carrington's "La invención del mole" stages the origin of the dish as a violent farce—or perhaps as a modernized miracle play—in which colonizing Archbishops are no longer the beneficiaries of the wondrous dish, but its sacrificial objects. In Carrington's play, the clergy retains its causal significance to the dish's origin; only instead of preparing or receiving the meal as a tribute, Carrington's visiting Archbishop himself becomes one of the ingredients transformed in the dish's "gastronomic symphony." The play opens upon a dialogue between the Aztec king Moctezuma and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who are discussing the rites of the Catholic Church. Moctezuma quizzes the Archbishop on the passivity of the people who attend its religious ceremonies: "But they don't *do* anything," Moctezuma protests, surmising, almost incredulously, that "the people watch the same ceremony over and over again, without miracles, magic, sacrifices,

or dances! Such a religion is bound to stagnate completely in a few centuries!”¹⁴ The conversation soon degenerates into a discussion about preparing a meal for Moctezuma’s other visitor, King Pederast of Texcoco; with only gradually dawning awareness, the Archbishop realizes that he himself is to be cooked and eaten as the centerpiece of the ceremonial repast. The Archbishop is, naturally, outraged; in response to his indignant protests about “the abomination, the great sin you will be perpetrating in assassinating one of the high servants of the Lord,” Moctezuma explains:

All sorcerers know how to perform miracles and they endure great periods of fasting to do so. All you do is eat and sleep, and talk and talk. Why should we believe that you are a real sorcerer ... Can you work miracles, even one, one tiny one?

Whereas Montezuma’s argument proposes that the Catholic Church has no access to the sacred, the once-scene play redresses this lack of access in rendering the Archbishop its sacrificial object. The play concludes with the “increasingly piercing shrieks of the prelate” as he stews offstage in an earthen casserole “fit for an Archbishop.”¹⁵

The governing logic of Carrington’s darkly humorous play—a violent literalization of old jokes about “Montezuma’s revenge” as a digestive disorder—lies in its typological inversion of the Spanish conquest as a violent consumption of indigenous populations. Yet even as it stages a counterfactual moment of anti-colonial revenge, the play more profoundly mobilizes its cannibal violence toward a revision of national allegory, through which the legacy of colonial genocide becomes, quite literally, possible to digest. To the extent that the enshrinement of *mole poblano* as Mexico’s national dish allegorizes the assimilation of indigenous ingredients—chilies, chocolate, nuts—into a savory paste prepared for Spanish consumption, Carrington’s adaptation of its popular founding myths instead deploy the sauce as a vehicle for the very performance of “sorcery” that distinguished Aztec from Catholic ritual. For in death, the Archbishop does participate in a miracle: the magical transformation of his “odour of vestments” and “scent of perspiration” into a savory meal fit to be “assimilated, simply *absorbed*” by Aztec royal princes.¹⁶ “La invención del mole” does not simply transfer colonial violence into the hands of the Aztecs; it reestablishes the hegemony of Aztec ritual—in its sacrificial, cannibalistic extremes—as practices consistent with theories about the pre-Columbian origin of mole as part of a sacred economy through which life and death, gods and humans, were mediated through consumption.¹⁷ It is through these practices, as Moctezuma

explains in Carrington's play, that "our own anguish is something more vital, our desires, our passion, our deep thirst for marvels must be satiated. Otherwise we'll all turn into phantoms, or into something worse, empty ideas."¹⁸

Moctezuma's words echo those of Octavio Paz, who, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, likewise appeals to the Aztec culture of death and sacrifice as a corrective to the "optimistic and unilateral conception of existence" of Western modernity, whose humanistic contempt for the abstract realities of life and death alike have yielded at once "health, hygiene and contraception" as well as "concentration camps and collective extermination."¹⁹ While no less critical of the sterility represented by contemporary Mexico's indifference toward death—an indifference that derives from its omnipresence, rather than its suppression—Paz singles out the sacrificial and mortuary practices of ancient Mexicans as rites that maintain the fecundity, rather than the sterility, of death. "The opposition between life and death was not so absolute to the ancient Mexicans as it is to us," Paz explains. "Life had no higher function than to flow into death, its opposite and complement; and death, in turn, was not an end in itself: man fed the insatiable hunger of life with his death." Sacrifices, as a result, bore a double purpose: "on the one hand man participated in the creative process, at the same time paying back to the gods the debt contracted by his species; on the other hand he nourished cosmic life and also social life."²⁰

In Carrington's play, the sacrifice of the Archbishop serves a similarly double purpose: once purified of his foul odors and "indelicacy of taste," the Archbishop will quite literally feed the living Aztec monarchs; "everything," explains a friend of Moctezuma, will be "done with utmost dignity and aristocratic manners. At all times the conversation will shine with humor, ingenuity, and culture."²¹ The prelate's death thus nourishes Aztec culture, as well as the bellies of its hungry monarchs. Yet it is the literalness of its cannibalistic denouement that more fully addresses the "deep thirst for marvels" which, according to Moctezuma, constitutes a more fundamental craving, an anguish that prevents them from fading into phantoms and empty ideas. By serving as fodder for this "deep thirst"—that is, as the poached cleric miraculated by the preparation of *mole poblano*—the Archbishop's death satisfies the material urgency of Moctezuma's sense of liturgical ritual. At the same time, it also presents the hypostasis of the function of death as the principal marvel in Aztec cosmology: the prelate's real, screaming, sacrificial death trumps the abstract "Rock of Eternity" he represents.²² Carrington's black humor, in other words, restores death to its sovereignty as a "stage in a cosmic process," rather than formalizing it as an absolute, or by territorializing it as the property of an individual.

Carrington's recourse to ancient Mexican cosmologies, like Paz's, emerged at a moment in postwar and post-revolutionary Mexican intellectual history marked

by a surge in archeological and historical concentration. As Deborah Cohn has written, the “midcentury generation” of Mexican intellectuals in which Carrington participated institutionalized a cosmopolitan discourse on Mexican culture that coincided with the development of major, often internationally funded, public institutions that promoted the global significance of Mexican history and culture. The postwar era gave rise to large-scale projects such as the founding of the administrative Instituto Nacional Indigenista in 1948, an event that coincided, remarkably, with the discovery of the remains of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, in 1949.²³ Carrington’s “La Invención del mole” participates in this cosmopolitan tendency insofar as it refuses to deploy its pre-Columbian material in the service of post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism, wherein, as Claudio Lomnitz has suggested, the symbolism of death—most notably the iconic skulls featured in the days of the dead and the *calaveras* of José Guadalupe Posada—registered predominantly as the iconography of political equality.²⁴ Rather, Carrington’s play invokes Moctezuma and the Archbishop as a theatrical parable about internationalism, albeit an internationalism inseparable from genocidal violence. At once satirizing and revising a culinary legend that foregrounds the consumption of Mexican culture by Western powers, Carrington’s play rewrites the historical tragedy of Mexico’s internationalism in terms of the Aztec cosmology it invokes. Death asserts its sovereignty not only as an ethical or political symbol, but as a cosmological phase in a cycle of existence, and, in particular, as an affectively measurable historical force as well. The impersonal, macrocosmic scale of the Aztec culture of death imposes itself upon the mole legend’s allegory of international history—not as a temporary, carnivalesque suspension of the historical fact of the conquest, but as a transformation of its historical logic. Death rears its head as the violent imposition of an impersonal, yet no less “fecund,” cosmology of sacrifice and reabsorption, rather than as a revolutionary-era political symbol or as the empty signifier of an eradicated ancient culture.

Five years later, in a work of prose fiction published in the short-lived avant-garde journal *S.NO.B*, Carrington similarly inverts the logic of historical succession according to which the contemporary West consumes the ideas and artifacts of pre-Columbian Mexico. In “De cómo funde una industria o el sarcófago de hule,” Carrington offers a counterfactual portrait of a post-apocalyptic Mexico City in which the fragmentary ruins and remnants of Cold War-era modernity undergo an archaeological recirculation modeled on the traffic in Aztec and Mayan culture that was taking place during the 1950s and 60s. Its artifacts subject to an analogous misrecognition and adaptive reuse, the contemporary becomes comically defamiliarized. The story takes place in the Saint George Light and Power Cemetery,

located near the ruins of the Latin American Tower—a Mexico City landmark notable precisely for its durability, having withstood the 1957 earthquake almost immediately after it opened in 1956. In the midst of the cemetery stands a tavern called the Fat Swallow, which, explains Carrington’s narrator,

had apparently been some sort of church in the old days at the end of the Christian Era: that is, a place where melancholy rites were celebrated and believers gathered to hear discourses from a priest while they contemplated their God (now dead), a poor man nailed in an awful way to a wooden construction and languishing in apparent agony.

Consistent with the generic conventions of post-apocalyptic fiction, the overwhelming majority of the cultural practices of “those dark and barbarous times” have fallen into obscurity—including the killing of bulls, the use of firearms, and the “powerful electrical forces” outlawed by the Black King of the North, New York the First, and now used only in rituals. A few, however, have survived; on her way to a picnic with a number of the city’s dignitaries—Lord Popocatpetl (named after the volcano) and the Viscount Federal District (named after the Capitol itself)—the narrator pulls a “modest one-mule sled” loaded with “choice foods,” including six bottles of “the rare old Indian drink called cocacola, bottled at the source.”²⁵

Carrington’s counterfactual narrative forms the second of a pair of articles on “The City” published in the July 1962 issue of the experimental journal *S.NO.B*. The first of the two articles, José de la Colina’s “Metodo de Aprovechamiento Terrorífico,” articulates a method for reinhabiting Mexico City in a manner that would provoke terror as a revolutionary corrective to the banality of contemporary urban life.²⁶ Illustrated with striking images by the photographer Kati Horna, Colina’s essay reprises at once the urbanism of the surrealist and situationist movements and the “pataphysical Methodism” of Oulipo. Carrington’s “De como funde una industria,” by contrast, approaches the imaginative transformation of the city as its fictional premise, demarcating an urban Mexico already transformed and defamiliarized. Thus whereas the journal frames Carrington’s narrative as experimental urbanism, the logic of its fictional transformation resonates less with the work of surrealist *dérive* or cultural reportage than with the counterfactual universes of fantastic fiction. In this sense “De cómo funde una industria” resembles Carrington’s other contributions to *S.NO.B*, a series of satirical fairy tales she published under the rubric of the magazine’s “Children’s Corner.” At stake in these brief morality tales and poems, as elsewhere in Carrington’s written work, is the

form of reciprocity made possible by the transformations that operate within her fictional universe of beasts, shadowy figures, and metamorphosis: transformations that register the effects of vengeance, justice, and cruelty. In “A Chamomile Fairy Tale,” for instance, a little boy who repeatedly urinates out his window on passers-by receives a visit from an elephant and a horse, who devour his furniture and defecate in his tea:

Angelito remained in his room until he saw an elephant and a horse coming.

He peed on them.

The elephant came up to the room and ate up Angelito’s bed.

The horse climbed up on top of the dresser and sucked the painting off the wall.

Afterwards he pooped in the chamomile tea.

—You see?— said the elephant.²⁷

Rather than abstracting the “moral” of reciprocity at work in the fable, Carrington’s defamiliarization of the agents in this reciprocity—as sentient beasts—exacerbates the severity of the exchange without transfiguring its terms: the boy is still punished in terms of excretion (rather than, say, through violence), but the scale of this excretion has been categorically expanded. Juan García Ponce, himself a collaborator in the *S.NOB* journal, identifies this tendency toward depicting real social practices in comic form throughout Carrington’s written and painterly work; as Ponce writes in a 1974 essay,

More than anything else, her works are compositions based on customs and manners, into which the artist incorporates the most apparently banal elements, but elements that are treated with the admiration and surprise produced by the interior truth laid bare by her probing inspection, as well as with irony and humor. In them, just as in life, the grotesque and the terrible break out in the most unexpected ways, but always as the result of the very nature of things as they are.²⁸

The real manners and customs to which Ponce alludes are far, however, from simply empirical measures of social behavior, as if grounded on a stable basis of ethnographic or economic fact. As the “Chamomile Fairy Tale” suggests, Carrington’s fictional universe instead functions in accordance with a moral system

governed by a visible, even didactic reciprocity: upon defecating in Angelito's tea, the elephant adds the demonstrative "you see?" as the conclusion to its moralizing gesture. Carrington's writing concerns itself more with the punitive enforcement of "manners and customs," we might say, than with the positive content of those manners and customs themselves.

As in the case of her earlier "Invención del mole," Carrington's grotesque portrait of Mexico City in her 1962 "De cómo funde una industria" extends this moral logic of reciprocity toward a general economy of historical recirculation. Rather than merely offering a parody of the contemporary Mexican cultural landscape haunted by its rediscovered Aztec past, the story formalizes this haunted presence as its governing historical logic. In the story, ancient artifacts, once returned to circulation, retain striking traces of their prior historical power, which has been occulted—indeed, often misrecognized and misattributed—yet which is still measurable. During her picnic with city dignitaries, the narrator's group is interrupted by a man in a white suit who presents her with an India rubber casket, "fit for a very small child." At first, she uses the box as a table for the picnic lunch, but its "disagreeable odor" causes the noble guests quickly to take their leave. The narrator reflects on her increasing anxiety about the contents of the child-sized rubber casket: "fear," she explains, "kept me from opening my prize casket ... I felt an uncertainty and a degree of anxiety that seemed to emanate from the ancient graves of the cemetery itself. It was as if the anguish was not properly mind, but something from out of that distant twentieth century of dread repute."²⁹ In spite of its ominous affect, the contents of the rubber casket are less tragic, however, than absurdly reliquary. When the narrator opens the series of nesting boxes inside the casket, she finds a "marvelously preserved," toothbrush-sized mummy of Joseph Stalin, identifiable by its enormous mustache, as well as by an inscription that identifies the homuncular "Joseph Stalin, A.D. 1948" as a gift presented by turns to Queen Elizabeth II, Dwight Eisenhower, and, finally, to the National Museum of Mexico "in commemoration of Saint Light and Power, canonized in 1958 by the Vatican."³⁰

Upon reading the inscription, Carrington's narrator indulges in some satirically-inclined reflection on the figure's significance, based on the expertise of a recently-deceased historical scholar named Lady Haughty Corner: "Doubtless the letters USA had been correctly translated ... as 'United Self-Annihilation.' Just as USSR stood for (according to the same authority) 'United Solo Sepulchre Regression.'" But the story's conclusion—or its punch line—has less to do with its parodic translations of the acronyms of Cold War superpowers, than with the transformed power of Stalin's corpse. "This relic from those ill-fated times," explains the messenger who has delivered it, "possesses medicinal value too." He places a hair

from Stalin's mustache on the narrator's tongue.

I noticed a sardine taste that made me shiver. Twentieth-century druggists promoted odd practices. I suddenly felt invaded as if by a divine light that whispered: 'Aspirin was like this.' I fainted.³¹

At the story's close, the narrator has founded a pharmaceuticals industry derived from the tiny mannekin, naming its product, "Apostalin," as one of the country's leading exports. Regardless of the extent to which the myth and political legacy of Stalin retained their all-too-real political power after his death in 1953—one need think only of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956—the pharmaceutical value of Stalin's corpse derives its satirical charge from the extent to which this power becomes, like that of the Archbishop in "La invención del Mole," utterly subject to a reimagined economy in which his death is no longer his own. For one, the inscription dates the mummy to 1948—not the year of Stalin's actual death, in other words, but a year more recognizable as the year of Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe and the crystallization of the Cold War. The body of Stalin has been passed among the Western superpowers as a gift object; the inscription bears a line in Latin, *Quia Nobis Solis Artem per nos solo investigatam tradimus et non aliis*, suggesting the passing along of an alchemical secret.³² Yet once in the hands of the narrator—its change of provenance remains unexplained—the shrunken, mummified cadaver of the Soviet leader and General Secretary of the Communist Party becomes the fortuitous source for entrepreneurial capitalism. Marketing "Apostalin" for its ability to treat "whooping cough, syphilis, grippe, childbearing, and other convulsions," Carrington's narrator has achieved commercial success whereby "though not exactly rich," she enjoys "ease and tranquility, everything I need, and whatever is required for an agreeable and distinguished life."³³

Carrington's post-apocalyptic urban fantasy thus does not merely satirize Stalin—or Western modernity—by subjecting him to a postmortem humiliation analogous to the culinary martyrdom of the Archbishop. The posthumous fate of such a figure is no less a reintegration: a reabsorption of his historical violence into an ethical and historical economy regulated according to the practice of death. Unlike the earlier, post-revolutionary tradition in Mexican art that deploys the imagery of death and reliquary objects as a mode of political critique, Carrington invokes such imagery in order to demarcate this economy itself. Informed by the midcentury Mexican avant-garde's reassessment of its pre-Columbian history, as well as by the European avant-garde's growing antihumanism, Carrington's midcentury work articulates an ethical project grounded in the sovereignty of

an utterly impersonal system of continuity and recirculation consistent with the inevitability, as well as the fecundity, of death. Like her French peers, such as Bataille and Blanchot, Carrington's writing identifies death as the condition of collective existence; yet in place of Bataille's sacrificial, masochistic identification with its excess or Blanchot's formalization of its paradoxical immediacy and inaccessibility, Carrington's comic tales deploy the explicitly metaphysical cosmologies of ancient Mexico as living cultures of death that have themselves been subjected to eradication and erasure. By imagining their return to sovereignty, Carrington's writing dramatizes the historical contingency of any such metaphysical system. In spite of what Juan García Ponce refers to as Carrington's "natural magic"—a restoration of "life and death, watchfulness and slumber, reality and imagination" to their original unity—her work withholds the transcendental certainty that might guarantee any such holistic reintegration. The Archbishop of Canterbury dies screaming in a pot; the medicinal homunculus, its date incorrectly labeled, might not even be Stalin at all. Indeed, the intra-diegetical possibility that death may in fact be final and absolute remains a necessary condition of the system of economic relations Carrington invokes throughout her fiction.

Far from simply replacing European ideas about death with pre-Columbian ones, the black humor of Carrington's work opens up a counterfactual meditation on negative community as doubly founded in the so-called Aztec idea of death, as it was understood at midcentury. In recognizing the extent to which pre-Columbian ideas were themselves bound up in a complex history of erasure and recirculation, Carrington's recourse to an Aztec economy of death was likewise conditioned by the historical—and not simply fictional—exercise of this economy. Yet unlike the notions of "eternal return" posited by contemporaries such as Jung and Eliade, who propose an epochal shift back to the age of magic, Carrington's recourse to pre-Columbian cosmology resides in the counterfactual. Within the diegesis of her writing, what bears the "shattering" threat to the subject, and especially to any subject of power, is a purely formal law of historical reciprocity that promises neither fulfillment nor the restoration of worldly order. Yet it is precisely in its formalism that this reciprocity bears out both its black humor and its revision of contemporary European thinking. For insofar as the pre-Columbian idea of death was indistinguishable from the historicity of its economic logic, the historical "death" to which pre-Columbian civilization was subjected—however genocidal—could never be absolute. Among the traces of this civilization that survived the Spanish conquest, the cosmology of death itself remained as a set of forms whose persistence testifies to the insufficiency not only of the humanist subject but of death itself as well. For intellectuals living in the shattered existential landscape of

postwar Europe, the possibility of forging a meaningful existence, a meaningful collectivity, or even a meaningful notion of death proceeded from the absolute historical event of radical absence. As the basis of Carrington's ideas about negative community, the Mexican "culture of death" functions as both the fictional medium and the historical condition for a formal system of absolute moral and historical judgment, without ever becoming a formal absolute in itself. Perhaps it is this very distance from the absolute—as much as any Bretonian "exchange of humorous pleasure"—that might explain why Carrington's protagonists manage always to smile pleasantly in the face of atrocity and the death of the other.

1 André Breton, *The Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti. (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1997), 335-36.

2 Breton, xiii.

3 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris. (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1988), 6. See also Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire* (1949). Trans. Charlotte Mandell. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995), 300-344.

4 Blanchot, 9.

5 For a discussion of social relations in "The Debutante," see Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism, and Difference: Transatlantic Culture, 1919-1945*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 74-98.

6 On the mural project, entitled *El Mundo Mágico de los Mayas*, see esp. Whitney Chadwick, *Leonora Carrington: The Mexican Years, 1943-1985* (San Francisco, CA: Mexican Museum), 1991.

7 On the Poesía en Voz Alta group, see Roni Unger, *Poesía en Voz Alta in the Theater of Mexico*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press), 1981. See also Claire Kunny, "Leonora Carrington's Mexican Vision," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* Vol. 22: No. 2 (1996), 166-179 and 199-200; and the facsimile edition of *S.NO.B* (Mexico: Editorial Aldus), 2004. See also Elena Poniatowska, *Leonora*. (Mexico: Seix Barral, 2011), see especially 415-42.

8 Breton himself draws upon the woodcuts of José Guadalupe Posada in the introduction to his *Anthology of Black Humor*, hyperbolically nominating post-revolutionary Mexico, 'with its splendid funeral toys,' as "the chosen land of black humor." Breton, *Anthology*, xvii. For a revisionist account of the surrealist movement's ties to Mexico, see Luis Castañeda, 'Surrealism and National Identity in Mexico: Changing Perceptions, 1940-1968,' *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 3:1-2 (2009), 9-29; see also the special issue of *Mélusine* entitled 'México: Miroir magnétique' (1999).

9 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), trans. Lysander Kemp. (New York: Grove, 1985), 57.

10 Paz, 60. For an invaluable survey of other surrealist approaches to the theme of death, see Thierry Aubert, *Le Surréaliste et la mort* (Paris: L'Age d'homme, 2001). On the "culture of death" in Mexico, see Kristin Norget, *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).

11 On Paz's *La hija de Rappaccini*, see esp. Caroline Egan, "Rappaccini's Daughters: Hawthorne, Paz, and Rewriting in the Americas," (work in progress). See also Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 180-220.

12 Alfonso Reyes, *Memorias de cocina y bodega* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), 111-2.

- 13 See Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist*. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), esp. 11-29. See also Pilcher, Jeffrey, *Que vivan los tamales: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) and Taibo, Paco Ignacio, *Encuentro de dos fogones*. 2 Vols. (Mexico: Promoción e Imágenes, 1992). My thanks to John Ochoa for bringing these latter texts to my attention.
- 14 Leonora Carrington, "The Invention of Mole: A Play," trans. Anthony Kerrigan. In *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1988), 170.
- 15 Carrington, "The Invention of Mole," 175.
- 16 Carrington, "The Invention of Mole," 173.
- 17 See especially Montoya, 21-28.
- 18 Carrington, "The Invention of Mole," 170.
- 19 Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 57 and 60.
- 20 Pax, 54. For a useful relativization of Paz's position, see Norget, especially 1-24.
- 21 Carrington, "Invention of Mole," 172-3.
- 22 Carrington, "Invention of Mole," 170.
- 23 Deborah Cohn, "The Mexican Intelligentsia, 1950-1968: Cosmopolitanism, National Identity, and the State." *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Winter, 2005), 141-82 and 150.
- 24 Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*. (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2005), 417.
- 25 Carrington, "Invention of Mole," 182.
- 26 José de la Colina, "Metodo de Aprovechamiento Terrorifico," *S.NO B* 3 (Jul., 1962): 10-15.
- 27 Leonora Carrington, "El cuento feo de la manzanilla," *S.NO B* 2, (1962): 26-27. My translation.
- 28 Juan García Ponce, "Natural Magic," in *Leonora Carrington*. (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1974).
- 29 Carrington, *Seventh Horse*, 184.
- 30 Carrington, *Seventh Horse*, 185.
- 31 Carrington, "Invention of Mole," 186.
- 32 See C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944). Trans. R.F.C. Hull. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP), 1980. The Latin phrase reads: "Because we alone, and not others, devote ourselves to the art of investigation."
- 33 Carrington, "How to Start a Pharmaceuticals Business," 186.